

[By Jon Margolis](#)

Slowly, Vermont is moving away from the flood plain.

That's where most of the houses and other buildings destroyed by Tropical Storm Irene's flooding last year were located.

If the owners of those properties want government help to restart their lives, they will have to restart them farther upland. Under a federal-state plan announced Wednesday, some of those property owners will get a mitigation buyout, funding that will help them rebuild or buy a home elsewhere.

They will not be able to rebuild on their former streamside land. Neither will anyone else. "No structures can be rebuilt on the flood prone land," said a statement from Gov. Peter Shumlin's office.

The point of the program is to "reduce the number of properties in the flood plain," said Sue Minter, the state's Irene recovery officer.

This is federal policy, not unique to Vermont, said Peter Rennert, the regional team leader for the Federal Emergency Management Agency. But Shumlin appears to be more convinced than most other governors that getting as many homes and businesses off the flood plain is advisable, if not necessary.

"With climate change in the future, it's clear we'll be flooded again," Shumlin said.

Climate scientists might argue with the governor's certainty on that point. But warmer temperatures are consistent with more and heavier precipitation, and few would argue with

Shumlin's belief that rebuilding on higher ground would render it less likely that the state will "make the same mistakes time after time."

The federal policy isn't brand new, either, Rennert said. But neither is it that old. Only in the 1990s, during the Clinton administration, did federal officials begin to resist allowing residents to rebuild on the flood plain, at least with federal money.

Shumlin and U.S. Rep Peter Welch announced Wednesday in Northfield that the federal government would put up \$14.85 million of \$19.8 million of "investment to reduce the risk of property damage due to future flooding." Shumlin said the state would try to come up with the other \$4.95 million so localities would not have to bear any of the burden.

According to a map distributed by the governor's office, 16 buildings in Northfield, 13 of them houses, were swept away when the Dog River overflowed its banks last August. Under the Hazard Mitigation Program announced Wednesday, the owners of the ruined properties will get payments based on pre-flood property assessments.

The newly abandoned flood-plain land will belong to the town, so it will come off the tax rolls.

"That's why the town is the applicant," Minter said. "The town has to initiate the process."

Towns can't be forced to participate in the mitigation process. But unless they do, their residents who lost homes to Irene won't get the mitigation funds. Historically, Vermont towns have been reluctant to let any property become exempt from property taxes. In this case, though, it seems to have been Irene that robbed the land of its taxable value; government policy is merely recognizing that fact.

In Northfield, students at Norwich University, led by town resident Caleb Buffington, a Norwich junior majoring in architecture, is working on a planning process for how to use the new streamside public land, some of which might be used for recreation, some for gardening.

Northfield is just one of 26 towns in which a total of 76 homeowners have applied for mitigation. In addition, 22 vacation home owners in 10 towns and commercial property owners in five have applied. All the projects have to be approved by FEMA before work can begin.

Shumlin acknowledged that not every property owner was going to be made whole by the mitigation payments. Furthermore, the beneficiaries of Wednesday's announcement are a small percentage of those whose homes and businesses were destroyed or severely damaged by the flooding. There will be two more rounds of buyouts, but as the governor noted, FEMA's budget is limited. The deadline for eligible property owners to apply for the second round is this Friday.